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ABSTRACT

Conditions of illiteracy and functional illiteracy frustrate the intent of laws like the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) that provide job training and employment opportunities for the economically disadvantaged, unemployed, or underemployed. The Adult Education Act of 1978 should provide the basic educational skills needed by CETA applicants, but the federal funding for adult education has been inadequate. With respect to funding problems for prevocational programs, the state of New York has begun awarding state appropriations by giving preference to proposals that link basic literacy and language instruction with CETA, adult vocational education, and high school diploma/equivalency programs. With the recent federal budget cuts, what is needed is a recognition that most employment in this society demands at least an eighth grade reading level and that training and employment services will be cost effective only if the recipient is literate or receives some literacy training. (HTH)

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Law and Policy in Educating Under-Educated Adults

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Copperman (1980) reported that a 1975 Adult Performance Level study found that 20 percent of the adult American public could not perform basic reading tasks such as reading a want ad, filling out a job application or addressing an envelope, another 33% were functioning with difficulty, 40% were living with incomes under the poverty level and 36% of the unemployed were functionally illiterate. A study by Murphy (1973) revealed that one out of every five participants could not complete reading tasks which involved common signs and schedules. The National Advisory Council on Adult Education (1971) indicated that only 4% of the adults who did not have a high school diploma entered adult basic education programs. Another study performed by Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) reported that only 1.3% of the adults in the lowest quarter of family income who lacked high school diplomas were enrolled in adult basic education.

Another Adult Performance Level study, reported by Copperman (1980), indicated that a seventh grade reading level is needed to hold a job as a mechanic, and a tenth grade reading level is needed to hold a position as a supply clerk. It can be expected that jobs as secretary, computer operator, typist, and bookkeeper demand higher reading levels. Sticht (1975), in defining functional illiteracy in terms of reading for job related tasks, found that 30% of the material written for army supply specialists was above 12.0 grade level and 58% between 9.9 and 11.9 grade level and that 50% of the material written for ground control repairman was written above 12.0 grade level.

Under Educated Adults

Informal studies in such diverse states as New York and Arizona show that many persons of low socio-economic status are prevented from entering job training programs because of their low levels of basic skills functioning, especially reading. This condition prevails in the young adult group, ages 16 to 24, where the greatest amount of unemployment exists.

CETA Law and Adult Basic Education Appropriations

Conditions of illiteracy and functional illiteracy frustrate the intent of laws such as CETA which provide for "job training and employment opportunities for economically disadvantaged unemployed or under employed persons," assuring that "training and other services will lead to maximum employment opportunities and enhance self-sufficiency by establishing a flexible, coordinated, and decentralized system of Federal, State, and local programs," and providing "for the maximum feasible coordination of plans, programs, and activities . . . with economic development, community development, and related activities, such as vocational education . . . " (CETA, Public Law 95-524, October 27, 1981). This law states that employment and training services will be provided for the "most-in'need" of the population which would include low-income persons, handicapped individuals, older workers, and persons of limited English-speaking ability. It is based on an assumption that all those who come for such services will be ready for training for unsubsidized employment. Such is not the case. It has been estimated that in New York City alone approximately two-thirds of the people eligibile for CETA employment and training services are unable to avail themselves of such services because of functional illiteracy or inability to speak English.

Although pre-vocational education and training is not expressly excluded from the CETA law, concerns about the cost per participant per program and the criteria of a successful program performance, which is placement of the participant in unsubisdized employment, serve as a check on including basic educational skills in offerings for employment and training. A reinterpretation of the CETA law which includes criteria addressing successful completion of pre-vocational skills is necessary for the spirit as well as the letter of the CETA law to be filled. People who are eligible for CETA employment and training services and who are most in need usually require pre-vocational education and training.

The Adult Education Act of 1978 was enacted to expand educational opportunities for adults and to encourage the establishment of programs of adult education which would enable adults to acquire basic skills, provide opportunities to those adults who chose to complete secondary school, and make available to adults the means to secure training which would enable them to become more employable, productive, and responsible citizens. This Act should provide the basic educational skills to most in need people. The major problem is that federal funding for this Act has been approximately one percent to one and one quarter percent of the level of funding for CETA. In addition, each state has its own appropriation for adult education. The 1978-79 State Appropriations for Adult Education as reported by National Association for Public Continuing and Adult Education showed that the State of Washington ranked first in spending $50.87 per year for each person over age 16 who had less than a high school diploma, Michigan was second spending $36.53 per person, and Colorado Idaho, Missouri, and Oklahoma reported no funds appropriated for adult education.

Therefore, the level of funding for this Act could not begin to remedy the crises of functional illiteracy faced by many who want employment but do not have the basic skills to enter employment training.

One strategy for solving this problem of funding pre-vocational training has been addressed by New York State. In awarding funds for adult basic education programs in New York State preference is given to proposals which link basic literacy and language instruction with CETA and adult vocational education programs or with high school diploma or high school equivalency classes. Emphasis is placed on those participants whose reading level is below ninth grade or who are extrememly limited in understanding or speaking English, and/or are unemployed.

Implications for Policy Makers

The lack of understanding of the functionally illiterate contribute to poor performance of CETA programas and leads to the low level of appropriation for adult basic education. It appears that policy makers believe that the majority of adults are literate and with some training in an occupation can find a job. The research that surrounds literacy and job seeking in the adult population belies this notion. Functional illiteracy is on the rise as is unemployment.

Now more than ever, especially with the recent federal budget cuts, what is needed to serve the most in need, is a recognition that most employment in this society demands at least an eigth grade reading level and that employment and training services will be cost effective only if the recipient is prepared to benefit from them. Key policy issues then would include the following:

1. a serious attempt to break down the informational, situational, institutional, and attitudinal barriers of those who need adult basic education services most;

2. an acknowledgement that literacy is a serious matter for adults because it directly results in success in employment and social and economic survival;

3. a recognition that adult literacy is an investment in the future not only of the literate adult but also all whom that adult reaches;

4. a provision in the CETA law and the Adult Education Act that links each for the joint delivery of services;

5. use of CETA funds for literacy and pre-vocational education that would increase cost per participant but would lower actual placement costs as those who could obtain employment would be able to remain employed;

6. development of criteria for successful CETA program performance which would incorporate participants who complete literacy training, pre-vocational training and then continue in other vocational training programs:

7. significant departures from traditional strategies of recruitment and programming for the functionally illiterate adult.

Conclusion

The development of law and policy in establishing appropriate education and training programs for the truly needy requires departure from the traditional categorical thinking that has characterized it to date. Labor can no longer be separated from education as education can no longer be isolated from the community. People who are to become functional in society, pay taxes, and vote need to be literate and need to obtain jobs. These people cross the lines of education and labor. Policy makers should construct policy which would take into account the characteristics of the people for whom the laws were created. Then, perhaps the

most in need would learn to read and compute well enough to be able to take advantage of employment and training services and eventually find employment in the private sector.

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